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ABSTRACT

A group approach to dealing with stress is the basis for a series of workshops outlined in this paper. The stress management program materials, especially suitable for those in the helping professions, identifies the nature and causes of stress, and uses group supports to target and work to change counter-productive stress-related behaviors. The sessions focus on stress-prone personalities, physiology, and practical methods of coping with stress for populations of students, educators, and housewives. The format of this model is designed for a five-session presentation, but may be modified as needed. (Author/JAC)

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# Coping with Stress: A Group Counseling Approach

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# COPING WITH STRESS:
# A GROUP COUNSELING APPROACH

Stress has been described as a modern epidemic, affecting most twentieth century humans in a variety of ways. Symptoms range from tension headaches, exhaustion, high blood pressure and heart attacks and physicians warn of the potentially dangerous consequences of severe or prolonged stress. (Selye, 1974). In education, and the helping professions, "burnout" is an increasingly alarming phenomena, resulting from the strain of on-the-job tensions and frustrations. It would seem that counselors might be interested in helping clients to cope with and manage stress in their personal and professional lives; this article describes a group approach to dealing with stress. Both the stimulating interaction with the group and the support provided by the group seem to be helpful to individuals learning to manage stress. Moreover, changing stress-filled behavior is best done in a group setting with a trained counselor.

The proposed model workshop is designed for presentation in five one-hour sessions (though longer sessions could be held if convenient, in order further to discuss the material presented.) Participants in such a group (which could be scheduled

either at the lunch hour or in after work in-service training sessions) should be limited to 15; the group leader should be a counselor psychologist, or trained facilitor with some education and experience in stress management. Groups that are especially successful are comprised of somewhat homogeneous members with much in common: i.e., students, faculty, housewives, etc. In the preliminary advertising of the workshop its purpose is introduced: that of helping the participants to define, become aware of the causes and learn to manage stress in their own lives. The outline of the group workshop which follows is designed for a standard five-session presentation, but the format can be modified to suit a particular group's needs.

In Session 1, the group has an opportunity to become acquainted and establish a climate of trust, through self introduction and a mutual agreement on the goals and purposes of the workshop. During this session, the group leader defines stress (pressure felt in the mind and body during an experience of real or perceived change) and differentiates between "good" stress, which every organism needs to survive ("eustress") and the "bad" stress which can be destructive ("distress") according to the research of Dr. Hans Selye, (1974), a prominent researcher in the field. Common symptoms of stress are outlined to the group (insomnia, stomach pains, excessive sleep,

pains in chest, ulcers, headache, migraines, digestive problems, etc.) and signs of emotional strain are also named (Adams, 1978) such as:

1. minor disappointments unduly upsetting
2. difficulty in getting along with people
3. not getting enjoyment from previously enjoyed activities
4. haunted by anxieties
5. frightened of people and situations
6. becoming suspicious, even of friends
7. feeling of being trapped
8. feeling of total inadequacy
9. overdependence on food, drink or alcohol

At this point, it is helpful to invite a medical professional to address the group to explain the physiological response to a stressful situation, since being able to appreciate the bodily response to fear or anger (the "fight or flight" response) facilitates cooperation with our body's efforts to adapt. (Such an explanation might include the heart beating faster, the increase in breathing speed, movement of stored sugar and fats from liver into blood, digestion slowing, pupils dilating in eyes, muscles tensing, ready for action, the powerful hormone adrenaline surging into the bloodstream, all perfectly designed to enable primitive man either to run from or combat physical danger.)

Session 1 concludes with the distribution of the Holmes-Rahe "Social Readjustment Rating Scale" (Holmes and Rahe, 1967), which rates the most stressful situations in life and makes two important points: (1) the effects of stress tend to be cumulative and (2) happy events (i.e. Christmas and job promotion) can also cause stress. The final observation to conclude session one is that"people" jobs are the most stressful; that is, those involving the welfare of large numbers of people, but providing little control over necessary resources, few outlets for frustration, while requiring response to many stimuli, i.e., educational professionals, social service and health professionals, counselors, middle level administrators - and housewives.

Session 2 deals with the stress-prone personality and its surprising variations. Since the amount of stress experienced by a person depends not only on the external environment or stressful event, but on the individual's personality and attitude toward stress, it is important to describe the two types of stress-prone personality: (1) the hyperactive type and (2) the inward rage type. The hyperactive type (familiar as the Type A behavior of Rosenman and Friedman, 1974) is hurried, agressive, controlling and prone to heart attack, the familiar caricature of

the frenzied executive, impatient and easily angered. The second type, the "inward rage type" is less recognizable but equally prone to stress-related diseases and behavior. Characteristics of such inward rage types are:

1. feeling constantly hurried
2. dissatisfied with what one is doing now; always planning ahead
3. constantly interrupting and finishing other's sentences
4. doing two things at once
5. feeling that life is a constant struggle, a race against time
6. feeling that one should be in control at all times
7. loss of ability to concentrate and listen to new information
8. active refusal of new data
9. tunnel vision, concentrating on one's own needs and problems
10. loss of self-esteem
11. tendency to keep anger and frustration bottled up inside, until sudden and inappropriate rages explode

At this point most of the group who can recognize the extent of their stress-prone behavior will agree that many of their typical behavior patterns are counter productive

bad habits that are personally as well as professionally undesirable. The remainder of the workshop sessions will concentrate on identifying and changing those behavior patterns. In preparation for Session 3, participants are asked to identify (in a journal which they will keep for this purpose) the causes of stress they are currently experiencing, both personally and/or in their job situation. They are asked to further differentiate between recent events and on-going events and conditions that are causing these stresses.

Since Session 3 is devoted to stress and health, it might again be appropriate to invite a nurse or medical para-professional in the role as guest lecturer and resource person for the discussion to follow. The relationship between stress and health is explored, with emphasis placed on nutrition, rest and exercise. Here in particular, the medical resource person can provide the necessary diet information (Mayer, 1975) and explain the importance of exercise as a tension reliever. The session usually concludes with a presentation and discussion of the physical warning signs of stress, so that group members will be alert to warning signs of stress given by the body.

Session 4 begins the practical coping sessions of the workshop, dealing first with coping with stress in one's personal life. Relaxation techniques are presented and discussed

(Fensterheim and Baer, 1977, Benson, 1976) and the desensitization process is introduced (Bower and Bower, 1976), the goal of which is to remain relaxed while visualizing the stressful situations from the least stressful to the most anxiety-producing scene. In some cases, learning simple assertive techniques (Bower and Bower, 1976) can help to alleviate stressful situations in which one's rights have been violated. Examples are given of learning to cope through self-control statements (Fensterheim and Baer, 1977). Since the participants themselves know better what strategies and statements will help them to remain calm under stress, they are then invited to list their own coping statements for each of the following situations: (1) Preparing for a stressful situation; (2) Handling a stressful situation; (3) Coping with a feeling of panic; (4) Reinforcing statements. Other helps in coping with personal stress which can be presented by the group leader include: change or modification of a situation, if possible; temporary or partial withdrawal, and use of time management principles (Lakein, 1974).

The remainder of the session is devoted to an identification of some of the personal behaviors that lead to stress (compulsiveness, perfectionism, measuring life and achievements in quantities rather than quality, trying to do every-

thing oneself, wasting anger on trivial matters, not allowing enough time to complete tasks, not allowing leisure time or "wasted" time) and discussion of ways to avoid these negative behaviors.

The final session concerns coping with stress on the job. Some of the methods recommended include: (1) becoming aware of the tension symptoms; (2) keeping worry in proportion to the problem; (3) leaving schedules open and flexible for the unexpected; (4) changing work and thought habits to match the problem at hand; (5) keeping moods under control; (6) viewing all job problems on a business level and (7) allowing oneself a total rest from business problems often; a few short breaks in the middle of each day can be as valuable as a vacation once in a while (adapted from Bureau of Business Practice, 1979). Participants are encouraged to identify and stress those nurturing, positive, "T.L.C." aspects of their job situation as an antidote to tension.

One of the most important positive protections against stress is a support network. A satisfactory support network provides a security base, a feeling of belonging and acceptance. It can also enhance one's confidence and competence and provide means for managing personal stress. Such a network includes

varying types and depths of relationships to suit one's specific needs. Moreover, the need for support changes as one's life changes (Seashore and Seashore, 1974). Close friends are only one part of support system; other sources of support include family, experts, helpers, reference groups (profession, hobby), challengers, respecters, access providers, energizers, approvers, financers, evaluators, and mentors. In the final exercise of the workshop, participants are asked to think about the kind of support, if any, they want from each support category and to evaluate the extent to which they are currently receiving it.

The workshop ends on a positive note, stressing the amount of control people actually have over their own lives: over their physical self, (through diet, exercise and rest) their personal life and relationships (through use of assertive communication and relaxation techniques) and their job situations (through use of time management techniques and career planning). To a certain extent, we <u>create</u> our own selves and environment by the choices we make.

## CONCLUSION

The group approach to managing stress workshop has been successfully used with groups of college students, educational administrators, faculty, professional staff, support staff, and community volunteers. Participants generally rate the workshop

beneficial in helping them to target and begin to change their own stress-related behavior. The group experience is felt to be particularly valuable for participants, as it provides both support and resources for individuals focusing on such a behavioral change.

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